

AN ADVENTURE INTO
TRADITIONAL BALINESE WEAVING.
BY STEPHANIE MEE



WARP & WEFT

LONG ago in a small village close to the sea, Bhatara Indra, the Creator god, was sitting in a tree admiring the moon and the stars. The divine beauty of the celestial bodies inspired him to teach the women of the village the meaning of the stars and how to reproduce those messages in cloth.

To this day, the women of Tenganan village continue to weave the same designs into sacred double ikat textiles known as *geringsing*, and the purity of these cloths is believed to have the power to protect against evil spirits and black magic.

Geringsing are perhaps the most intricate, revered and famous of all Balinese textiles, yet Bali has no shortage of cloths used for spiritual purposes. These textiles are called *bebali*, and they purify sacred spaces and protect against illness and evil spirits.

From the black and white checked *poleng* cloths you see wrapped around shrines and trees to shiny silk *songket* cloths used at weddings and tooth filings, and the geometric patterns of *endek*, textiles have long been an integral part of Balinese spirituality, and no Balinese Hindu would dare attend a ceremony or ritual without wearing some form of sacred cloth.

Traditionally, Balinese textiles were made by hand using cotton and silk threads, age-old dyeing and weaving techniques, natural plant-based dyes and wooden looms. With the advent of tourism, people were gradually lured away from the looms, and time-consuming dyeing and weaving processes were replaced with synthetic dyes and machine-produced fabrics.

As you can imagine, many techniques that were traditionally passed down through the generations were lost and the knowledge of particular motifs cast aside or forgotten.

Not so in Tenganan. This ancient Bali Aga village was well established long before the mass migration of Majapahit Hindus from Java to Bali, and the villagers here believe they are the descendants of those chosen by Bhatara Indra to tell the story of the stars.

Until recently, Tenganan was not open to outsiders, and

even today villagers must marry within their own community or be forced to live outside the protective walls of the village.

But times have changed, and tourists are now welcome to visit Tenganan. In fact, visitors are enthusiastically encouraged to enter the workshops and homes to learn about the village's unique weaving techniques and to purchase single and double ikat cloths.

I Wayan Sukardana is a native of Tenganan and a custodian of culture who believes that tradition is exactly what makes Tenganan and the *geringsing* cloths so valuable.

He says, "There are only four places in the world that make cloth like this: Guatemala, India, Japan and Tenganan, but the motifs in other places are different. Our motifs go back hundreds of years, and every weaver knows all 12 motifs by heart, so we don't need to write them down in books. Some people do experiment with new designs, but in general, we never change the motifs or techniques and the cotton and dyes are always natural."

A typical *geringsing* features the colours red, white and black to represent the gods Brahma, Siwa, and Wisnu respectively, and motifs include geometric maps of the village surrounded by hills and jungle, Wisnu's knife for protection, and madala-like patterns with interconnecting lines that represent the balance and connection between humans and the gods.

Only the women in Tenganan can weave the complicated patterns, because according to Wayan, "Men are impatient, so they work too fast and the quality is not good".

The production of these cloths is by no means easy. The women must take great care to maintain the correct tension of the threads on the loom and be sure that each weft and warp thread is lined up perfectly. One medium cloth can take up to six months to produce.

However, a large cloth around the size of a sarong can command up to 25 million IDR. For an antique *geringsing*, the sky is the limit, and there is certainly no shortage of demand for either new or antique *geringsing*.

Wayan says: "A lot of collectors come here to buy *geringsing* to put in museums or galleries, and we also get

many people who come to the village with tour guides to see the double ikat textiles and how they are made. Many people are so impressed that they buy one or two pieces to take home with them.

"Sometimes we also do exhibitions, but we rarely sell *geringsing* in the market because it is too difficult to tell the story there. Also, we almost never do custom orders because it takes too long to make one cloth. If someone wants a special order, they must wait anywhere from six months to a year and they can only have a traditional design."

The villagers of Tenganan are not the only ones who are sticklers for tradition. According to William Ingram, co-founder and co-director of Threads of Life, a fair trade business that works to conserve and revitalise traditional weaving techniques in Indonesia, a well-travelled and well-heeled sector of the Balinese population is fuelling a new market for traditional *bebali* made in the old ways.

"The new generation is now looking back to what their parents abandoned and reclaiming their culture, or even using traditional textiles as status symbols to show position," he says.

"For example, 20 years ago, *songket* cloths were only made and used by the Brahmana—people of the highest caste. But with the breakdown of the feudal system, these objects now mark status, so you see the strongest market is wealthy Balinese buying *songket* for weddings and other ceremonial purposes."

William also alludes to the desire of many people in Bali and other parts of Indonesia to express and maintain their identity through traditional cloths.

"With the formation of the Republic of Indonesia, there was a big push to de-emphasize ethnicity to create unity. While the production of material culture was supported and maintained, the actual spirit and ceremonial aspect of *adat* (traditional) cloths was undermined. Now you find many people who want to hold on to that ethnicity in the face of nationalism and commercialization."

While Threads of Life works with independent weaving cooperatives throughout Indonesia to protect and promote traditional weaving and dyeing techniques that are in danger of vanishing, Bali is a different story. William says, "Here you see less weavers forming groups, and more entrepreneurs with a cultural interest in conserving traditional techniques".

Ida Ayu Puniari is a perfect example of this. Ayu was concerned that the women in Sideman—a small town located in the lush hills of Karangasem that has long been a traditional centre for *songket* production—were abandoning natural colours and designs that they believed to be too elaborate or labour-intensive.

In 1999, she began testing out different dye plants to try to reproduce the bright colours that were used in the past. With the help of Threads of Life, she connected with dye experts from around the archipelago and began teaching *songket* patterns to the younger generation of weavers in Sideman. After many years of experimentation and determination, Ayu has finally succeeded in reintroducing the vibrant hues and complex *songket* designs that Sideman is once again famous for.

Another master of the dyes, Tjokorda Agung Pelayun, runs a *batik* workshop in Pejeng that uses only natural, organic indigo and plant-based brown dyes from his own crops grown by local farmers on fallow rice fields.

Batik is made by drawing or stamping designs on cloth in wax, dyeing the cloth, and then boiling the wax off. The process can be repeated many times for multi-coloured textiles or left as is for dual toned pieces.

Peruse through the stalls in any market here, and you would be forgiven for thinking that *batik* is at the heart of Balinese textiles. However, this dyeing technique actually has its roots in Java. In fact, very few people in Bali actually make *batik* the traditional way, so Tjok Agung made a reconnaissance mission to central Java to learn the art.

Today, his workshop (which is staffed mainly by women from the village and surrounding areas) produces some of the finest examples of *batik* in Bali, made using the traditional methods from Java and using only natural and sustainable materials.

William predicts that the future of textiles in Indonesia will go the same way as Japan, in that what you'll see is a small number of master producers supported by a small number of patrons.

"Of course, that depends on economic development. On the production side, economics must work at a community level and sustainability is also a huge issue," he says.

Although Threads of Life works diligently to conserve traditional techniques of weaving and dyeing, William also believes that evolution is not only inevitable but also necessary. He says, "It's not for us to bring back meaning to textiles. Our job is to let people decide what traditions to keep alive and what to leave behind".

Whether it's the storytellers of the stars using the ancient designs of their ancestors, dedicated revivalists seeking to preserve discarded motifs and techniques, or forward thinkers appropriating textile arts from neighbouring islands and working to promote natural and sustainable materials, it seems that the people of Bali are indeed choosing their own meanings and creating a new generation of master textile producers who would make Bhatara Indra, himself, proud. 